

One in ten adolescents in Northern Ireland self-harm

March 12 2014, by Nick Wade

New research has found that one in ten adolescents in Northern Ireland self-harm and that past exposure to the Northern Ireland conflict and social media are new associated risk factors.

The findings were made during the first study of its kind to investigate the rate of [self-harm](#) among adolescents in Northern Ireland as well as the factors associated with self-harm.

The study, led by Professor Rory O'Connor at the University of Glasgow and funded by the Northern Ireland Department of Health, Social Service and Public Safety (DHSSPS) and published in the *Journal of Affective Disorders*, surveyed 3,596 school pupils in Northern Ireland to ascertain the prevalence and factors associated with self-harm.

Alongside exposure to the Northern Ireland conflict and social media, established [risk factors](#) such as bullying, history of sexual and physical abuse, concerns about sexual orientation and drug and alcohol use were also associated with lifetime self-harm.

One in ten young people reported that they had self-harmed at some stage in their lives, which is lower than elsewhere in the UK and Republic of Ireland. Girls were found to be three and a half times more likely to engage in self-harm than boys.

This lower rate was unexpected given that the rates of hospital treated self-harm are high in Northern Ireland and the rates of mental disorders

in Northern Ireland are among the highest in Europe. Researchers believe that this discrepancy is due to the fact that as a result of the conflict, young people in Northern Ireland are more reluctant to disclose personal information, masking the true extent of the problem.

Lead researcher and Chair in Health Psychology at the University of Glasgow, Professor Rory O'Connor, said: "These findings highlight the wide range of risk factors associated with self-harm. They also suggest that the emotional and psychological legacy of the Northern Ireland conflict, as well as the influence of new technologies, are associated with self-harm among adolescents in Northern Ireland – and need to be addressed."

"It is important to note that more research is required before we are able to fully understand the full legacy of the Northern Ireland conflict, as well as the influence of new technologies on the mental wellbeing of our youth."

Professor Keith Hawton from University of Oxford and a co-author of the study added: "Increased understanding about the incidence of self-harm in adolescents in Northern Ireland and the factors that contribute to it as provided by the findings of this study are essential for the development of local prevention initiatives. In addition, the findings provide particularly valuable information about the influence of electronic and other media on self-harm in young people".

Edwin Poots, Minister for Health welcomed the study and said: "This research enhances our understanding of self harm among our [young people](#) and, in particular, the influence that [social media](#) can have. These findings will inform the development of programmes for reducing self harm. Given the association between self harming behaviour and later suicide attempts, the findings will also be of great benefit in developing the new Suicide Prevention Strategy for Northern Ireland."

More information: Rory C. O'Connor, Susan Rasmussen, Keith Hawton, "Adolescent self-harm: A school-based study in Northern Ireland," *Journal of Affective Disorders*, Volume 159, 20 April 2014, Pages 46-52, ISSN 0165-0327, [dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.jad.2014.02.015](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jad.2014.02.015).

Provided by University of Glasgow

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